

THE ART OF ACTING 3: SHAKESPEARE'S VERSE

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As most of you know, performing Shakespeare often requires the speaking of verse, usually *blank verse*, with a rhyming couplet at the end of certain soliloquies.

By verse we mean poetry, of course – words arranged in a line with particular attention to their sounds and rhythms, words arranged to evoke music, emotion, thought, vision, a world of wonder, mystery, and revelation.

Blank verse is poetry that has a regular number of beats per line. *Blank verse is rhythmic but does not rhyme.*

Free verse is poetry that does not have a regular number of beats each line. Its rhythm will vary. Some lines may have ten words, some may have two, and so on.

When we read a line of verse to determine its rhythm scheme (its *meter*), we are *scanning*. As we work on our Shakespeare scenes and monologues, you will often be directed to *scan* a line.

When we scan the line, we're checking to see how many *feet* are in each line, and where the *accent* is in each foot. Each *foot* in a line of poetry consists of two beats – a long beat and a short beat (or a strong beat and a soft beat, or a stressed beat or an unstressed beat).

The only poetic feet we need to know right now are the *iamb* and the *trochee*.

The iamb is a foot that has its *strong* beat, or *long* beat, on the *second* beat. The *accent* or *stress* is on the second beat.

The trochee is a foot where the accent is on the *first* beat. The *first* beat is stronger or longer.

Iambs and trochees can be made up of two *words* or two *syllables*.

Here are some examples of iambs and trochees:

“Indeed.” In – *deed*. Can you hear how the second syllable is longer and stronger? Indeed is an iamb.

“Elbow.” El – bow. The stress is on the first beat; the *el* is longer. Elbow is a trochee.

Now let’s take some words that are pronounced by some people as iambs and other people as trochees.

Let’s start with the word “police.” Many people pronounce this word: po – *lice* (iamb). But here in the South we also hear it pronounced: *po* – lice (trochee).

How about the word “guitar?” I pronounce it: gui – *tar* (iamb). I know a bass player from Lufkin, Texas who pronounces it: *guh* – tar (trochee).

Or take the word “rebel.” It’s an iamb when used as a verb. Daniel has been known to *rebel* against bad acting. Here the word “rebel” is pronounced: re – *bel* (iamb).

But let’s say: in acting, Daniel is a *rebel*. Here the word is pronounced: *re* – bel. It’s a trochee.

You can hear these accents in our names: Daniel Foster. *Dan* – yul *Fo* –ster (two trochees).

Nadine. Na – *dine* (iamb). Patrice. Pa – *trice* (iamb).

You can even hear the iambs in slang, like: what *up*, or: yeah, *right*.

Now let’s take some famous lines and see if we can find the iambs.

“In God we trust.” Say this line out loud and you’ll hear yourself stressing the second beat: in *God we trust*. This is a line of *two iambs*.

“To be or not to be.” *To be or not to be*. This is a line of *three iambs*.

Most of Shakespeare’s verse is written in *iambic pentameter*. Iambic pentameter (the Greek word *penta*, meaning five, and *meter*, from the Greek *metron*, meaning measure) simply means that there are *five* iambic feet in each line.

You will usually know when Shakespeare’s dialogue is in verse by how the lines are arranged. If the dialogue is in a paragraph, it’s usually prose. If it’s arranged in lines, it’s verse. When in doubt – *scan*.

Here is a line from Richmond’s speech in *Richard the Third*:

“The prayers of holy saints and wronged souls”

I’ve chosen this line for a reason, as you’ll see, but let’s break it down into iambs:

The *prayers* (iamb one) of *ho* (iamb two) ly *saints* (iamb three) and *wrong* (iamb four) ed *souls* (iamb five).

Are you starting to hear and feel the beats and stresses of the iambic line? Buh-BUH, buh-BUH, buh-BUH, buh-BUH, buh-BUH.

But this line presents an interesting problem for the actor. In books, the word “wronged” in that line has an accent mark over the “-ed,” making it clear that Shakespeare expected this syllable to be pronounced. But the actor has to decide if the audience will understand him if he pronounces “wronged,” *wrong - ed*. I’ve been pronouncing it both ways to see which is easier for listeners to understand. Several of the actors at the session gave “wronged” its full two-beat pronunciation – and it worked!

Let’s scan another line so we can see how Shakespeare uses the iambic accent for poetic effect: “One raised in blood, and one in blood established”

Speak the line and hit the strong beats: *One raised in blood and one in blood e-stab-lished.*

Do you hear how Shakespeare has made sure that the word *blood* falls on the strong or longer beat? This allows you to really emphasize *blood* – to *see red* as you convey how murderous Richard III is (you have called him a “bloody tyrant and a homicide” in the preceding line). But also note this: you wouldn’t want to stress the word *one* as much as you do the word *blood*. A good actor will find endless variety even in his beats and accents.

There’s something else to notice in this line: look at the extra syllable (half a foot) at the end of the line, the “lished” in *established*. This is an *irregular line* – it has five and a half feet, or, if you articulate the “ed” in “established” (*e-stab lish-ed*), *six* feet. Shakespeare is always willing to vary his meter, to “go irregular,” for sense or for emotional effect.

One of the chief criticisms of American actors who perform Shakespeare is that they don’t know how to speak verse, or don’t give the bard’s poetry proper heed. The verse in Shakespeare’s plays is dramatically important, and speaking it is simpler than it seems. Many writers on English have observed that there is a strong iambic stress

running through our speech – even “rap” is basically iambic. Most of the time in Shakespeare’s verse line the beat, the emphasis, is going to fall on a word just where it would fall in your daily speech. You do *not* have to recite verse in a sing-song manner, or like a metronome. Simply be aware of the rhythms, follow them naturally, and you will make valuable discoveries about the line’s meaning, the importance of certain words, the peaks and valleys in your speech. And if you do this, you will find that something amazing, well nigh miraculous, begins to happen: Shakespeare’s music will rouse new emotions in your soul, high, deep, tender, *fierce*, a spiritual majesty, a keen consciousness, a beautiful *way of being* you never imagined before. What an adventure for an actor – what an honor for the striving soul!

As most of my friends can attest, my love for Shakespeare approaches worship. I don’t just read or act him – I live in daily communion with him. In my deepest meditations on the “mad endeavor” of making art, the bringing forth of truth and beauty into this sin-blighted world, it is Shakespeare to whom I always turn; he inspires, guides, and even chastens me. There can be debate about the greatness of certain artists who have graced the centuries; of Shakespeare there can be none. *He is the greatest poet and dramatist who has ever lived or who ever shall live.* For those who seek the hallowed heights of art – and life – Shakespeare is *fate*. To deny him is to deny one of the highest calls of creation. Shakespeare is universal man and woman, the artist of the ages, bard immortal, poet of the cosmos, the bold and blessed navigator of the Soul’s vast, fearful, wondrous ocean.

All Hail to Thee, Splendid Swan of Avon!